

## **Why are Korean students so disciplined?**

### **Reflection on differences from my home country**

Before I came to Korea this summer, I had had some ideas about Korean schools already. All of my friends from Kyung Hee University told me that their K-12 time was very hard and they were glad to get out of school. So I came here with the idea that Korean schools must ask a lot from the students and give them lots of work to do.

However, what I could observe in the high school, the middle schools, and the elementary school was that the students don't really have to make an effort during the lessons (participation in class doesn't influence the grade basically), they don't get a lot of homework compared to Austrian students, and, unlike in Austria, it is very uncommon that students fail or drop out from school. This does not only apply to K-12 education but also to universities. Our university does not grade each student individually by their effort, but there is a certain proportion of grades that the professors are asked to give.

So why do the Korean students feel such a great pressure if it does not come from the institutions? Why did an ESL teacher from England<sup>1</sup>, who has been teaching in Korea for more than 7 years already, tell us, that if we haven't written it in our journals yet, we should write this in bold letters: **If there is one thing you must know, then it's that the Korean school system is highly competitive.**

I asked some of the eleven native speakers at Crystal elementary school about this and came to various conclusions:

- 1) The biggest pressure comes from Korean parents. As I was told, some of them think that compulsory schooling is not very helpful to their children. One English teacher told me that he once tried to communicate with parents about their son's lack of attention, but all he got as an answer was: "It's okay. We have plans for him later." Instead of caring about good results in regular school, the parents let their children go to private institutions, so-called Hagwons, where they have to study after school sometimes until 12 pm.<sup>2</sup> Rough estimates of the English teachers I talked to are that around 90% of the children go to Hagwons. From early childhood on the goal is to get one's children into one of the three top universities – Seoul National, Korea and Yonsei universities, which will almost guarantee the child a good job in the future.
- 2) Education and wealth seem to be interwoven in Korea. I feel very uncomfortable with the

tendency I grasp here, that education is a business rather than a part of society that should be free and accessible for everyone. As this school was a private school with a monthly tuition of around 300€, one can easily guess that it's only for wealthy families. In the "lottery"<sup>3</sup> in the afternoon I saw some of the parents. The mothers were mostly very fashionable, wearing designer costumes and jewelry. I also met a clerk from my bank there, who had applied for a place for his son, but he did not get it. If you think of the income of a bank clerk, then 300€ per month and possibly the same amount or more for a Hagwon seems extremely high, even if the wages were as high as in Austria.

- 3) One ESL teacher from Canada told me that the suicide rate in Korea is very high. A [BBC article](#) confirms that there are more than 40 suicides a day in South Korea. Compared to Austria, the Korean suicide rate is twice as high for men and four times as high for women. This might not have a direct connection to Korea's educational treadmills, but it's likely that the high competition gives many young people the feeling of being a failure and clearly contributes to people getting stressed.
- 4) I was always wondering why so many Korean people can't swim or ride a bike. Now my explanation for this is that they do not have enough spare time to learn such things. I also wondered why Korean students are so quiet in school. There are several possible reasons for that:
  1. Corporal punishment still exists in Korea, although severe forms of it have been banned recently. I heard many stories about slaps with wooden sticks; all of my fellow students at CBNU confirmed having experienced it in their school career, when I asked them. In one middle school I saw some boys who had to kneel in the aisle because they had been disobedient. I even saw a university professor slapping the back of a student's head once lightly and then stroking the student's head, which made me feel very awkward. Physical contact between teachers and students is very common in Korea, just like generally people touch their friends much more than they do in Austria. For further information about corporal punishment in Korea see the links in the reference section below.
  2. Korean students are so used to studying all day long that they don't know how to play anymore. They all seemed like little adults to me when I asked them about their school life. They shrug their shoulders like a pathetic office worker and say something like "Well, it's a stupid exam I'm studying for, but I have to do it anyway." Naturally, Austrian students complain about exams too; it was more the indifference and lack of juvenile reluctance that struck me.
  3. One Korean who has finished his 2-year military service gave me another explanation. He said that the students behave well because the male teachers, who have finished their military service, think that they should behave well, just like in military. Surprised, I asked back: "But just because those teachers think so doesn't mean that the students

will do so.” He answered: “It doesn't matter what the students think.”

4. The fact that Korean students are quiet doesn't necessarily mean that they pay more attention. Instead of chatting and disturbing the lesson, like it is common in Austria, inattentive students in Korea prefer to sleep or do something else quietly, e.g. read a comic or play with their cellphone.
- 5) There are many other things that Korean education is criticized for. There's even a whole [list of criticism on Wikipedia](#). For example, I didn't know that relationships are forbidden in most Korean middle and high schools. That explains why the relationships between Korean university students have often reminded me of my own first experiences as a teenager.

To summarize, what speaks for an educational system like the one in South Korea is that it helped South Korea's economy to become one of Asia's strongest economies. For the whole country, the hard work of the students is very beneficial, but the individuals suffer from it. Therefore, in a developed country like Austria, we do not need to implement any of the practices prevalent in Korean schools.

<sup>1</sup> Names kept anonymous

<sup>2</sup> Find more information about Hagwons in this article: [\[Link\]](#)

<sup>3</sup> Inverted commas here because I was told that the result of it is decided beforehand.

#### References:

- Guardian article about English teaching and Hagwons: [\[Link\]](#) (the comments are also worth reading)
- BBC News article about the high suicide rate: [\[Link\]](#)
- Corporal punishment in Korea: [\[Information\]](#) [\[Videos boys\]](#) [\[Videos girls\]](#) [\[Short documentary about the situation in 2011\]](#)